

William Varner, **James**, *Evangelical Exegetical Commentary*, General Editor: H. Wayne House, New Testament Editors: W. Hall Harris III, Andrew W. Pitts, Bellingham: Logos Bible Software), 2012.

The series of commentaries being published, in electronic format, by Logos Bible Software, titled the *Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* has a new addition authored by William Varner on the **Epistle of James**.

Varner's contribution runs to over 400 pages and is, true to the title of the series in which it appears, both exegetical and Evangelical. Along with the other commentaries so far published in the set, this one adopts the following format:

I. *Introduction*, in which Varner suggests, among many interesting things, that

James, the uterine brother of the Jesus and the undisputed leader during the first generation of the Christian movement (at least from A.D. 44–62), is writing a sort of “Diaspora encyclical” from Jerusalem to groups of primarily Jewish-Christian congregations. His writing most likely took place during the mid-to-late forties A.D., and the original recipient communities were probably located somewhere in or around Syria.

In this he sounds very much like Adolf Schlatter (though, so far as I know, Schlatter never used the German equivalent of ‘uterine’) who was, again so far as I recall, one of the only critical scholars to date James as early as the mid 40’s. I actually think such an early date is correct. What mystifies me in Varner’s treatment is that he never mentions Schlatter anywhere except in the bibliography at the conclusion of the volume.

The Introduction is extraordinarily thorough, covering every topic one would expect in a learned exposition aimed at readers of the Bible both familiar with scholarly method and who expect scholarship at its highest level. The commentary at hand provides both in spades.

Next

II. *The Commentary* (which commences on page 70, giving some indication of the meticulous character of the introduction).

The very careful exposition which characterizes the various volumes in the series is present here also. At 1:1, for instance, readers are treated to the

Original Text

ἰ Ἰάκωβος θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος ταῖς δώδεκα φυλαῖς ταῖς ἐν τῇ διασπορᾷ χαίρειν.

And

Textual Notes

1.a. The earliest complete NT manuscripts, \aleph and B, as well as a few uncials, include the inscription (title) Ἰακωβου Επιστολη, but the earliest manuscript of James (P74) is untitled.

1.b. A few manuscripts (429, 614, 630) also insert πατρος after θεου. The variant readings are late, the first simply reflecting a scribal effort to title the book, and the second an effort to distinguish clearly the divine Father from the Son.

As well as a fresh

Translation

1 James, a slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are in the Diaspora: Greetings.

Followed by the

Commentary

1:1 In customary fashion, the author immediately identifies himself to his readers as Jacob, the transliterated form of the Greek, Ἰάκωβος. The name is the Graecized form of the Hebrew name for the OT “Jacob” (Gen 27:36; Isa 41:8; 43:22; Jer 26:27 [LXX 30:10]; Ezek 28:25). Jacob (יַעֲקֹב), was a common name among Jewish men, appearing as the name of three prominent leaders in the early church: James the brother of John; James the Apostle, and James the brother of Jesus.¹⁰⁵ Here, as has been argued above in the introduction, the James referred to is the uterine half brother of Jesus (1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12). Although at first James was skeptical of his brother’s status as Son of God (John 7:3–5) he would later become, along with Peter and John, one of the three original pillars of the earliest church (Acts 15; Gal 2.9).

Discussion of v. 1 continues from page 72- page 77 whereat readers come to the section titled

Biblical Theology Comments

which carries on for a page. Finally, each pericope (for every pericope in the biblical text is examined under the same rubrics as discussed here) concludes with ‘application and devotional implications’. At this juncture Varner writes

Expositors may be perplexed as to how to handle such a seemingly nondescript greeting.¹²⁷ Perhaps the text is best utilized to open a series of messages or lessons on the entire book. In this message, some of the necessary information about the author, background, and occasion of the letter can be explored. I suggest the following outline of such a message. The titles of each main point hopefully are clear enough to prompt the teacher/preacher to develop them in their own unique way.

James the Man—James 1:1

1. James Was Once Blinded by the Light. The siblings of Jesus did not at first recognize the messianic character of their older brother. Jesus had four younger brothers and at least two younger sisters who shared their mother but not their father! (Mark 3:20–21; 6:3; John 7:5). The ideas that these were cousins or children from a previous marriage of Joseph are without any scriptural or historical foundation and arose centuries later from a desire to preserve the perpetual virginity of Mary. His brothers lived so close to the Light, however, that the Light blinded them.

2. James Was Then Brought to the Light. Evidently it took witnessing the miracle of the resurrection for His siblings to recognize who Jesus really was. The risen Jesus actually appeared personally to James, according to 1 Corinthians 15:7. In Acts 1:14 we see that James was with his mother and brothers praying with the other early believers. His brother Jude evidently was also brought to the light (Jude 1:1).

3. James Is Now Bearing the Light. The following passages indicate the major role of James as the eventual leader of the Jerusalem believers. The original leader of the apostles, Peter, was eventually replaced by James, whom Paul also recognized as the number one man in the movement. The following passages reveal his very important role: Galatians 1:18–19; 2:9; Acts 5:13–21; 21:17–26. He was the first of the “pillar apostles”: James, Peter, and John. As a slave of God and Christ, James spoke authoritatively to the entire church both then and now.

How can a letter intended initially for Jewish Christian readers in the first century be applicable to twenty-first-century “Gentile” Christians? Even since the church became overwhelmingly Gentile in its composition, believers in all ages who accept the messianic role of Jesus and hold to His faith (2:1) have accepted the message of the letter as relevant to their lives.

It is hard to find specific points in the letter that may not apply to any and all believers.

The sentence above which begins ‘Even since...’ should – I think – be ‘Ever since’. But, and this seems to be the appropriate place to point this out, one of the great advancements in the publication of Commentaries by Logos is that users of their software need only click on a suspect word and submit a ‘typo’ report. At the next update of the material, the typos reported are corrected. Would that such things were possible for print volumes!

On the whole, Varner’s work is careful, intelligent, and useful. His willingness to speak as often as he does of ‘wisdom’, for instance, is refreshing. His theological observations are astute too. Take as simply one example, this remark made in connection with 2:5-6

In 2:5-6, James contrasts the way God has treated the poor and the way some of James’ readers are treating them. Through the eyes of faith, the poor are “rich” because God has chosen them to be heirs of the kingdom. James’ language here seems clearly to echo the beatitudes. Luke 6:20 has “Blessed are ye poor” (οἱ πτωχοί) where Matthew 5:3 has “poor in spirit.” It is certain that the gospel made a powerful appeal to the poorer classes of society among both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus claimed it as part of his messianic mission “to preach good tidings to the poor” (Luke 4:18), as Isaiah 60:1-3 had foretold. He asked the messengers of John the Baptist to take back to Machærus the news that “the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Luke 7:22) as one proof of his messiahship. Paul enlarges on the choice by God of the foolish, the weak, the despised classes to add to his own glory (1 Cor 1:26-29). The early churches were largely gathered from the proletariat, not from those privileged by riches and class.

It is not as a mere pious platitude that James writes this. He is interpreting the soul of real Christianity as it is set forth by Jesus in the Beatitudes, where only those are blessed (μακάριοι) who have the joy of a spirit independent of outward conditions or circumstances. It is a pitiful thing to see a church of Jesus Christ that is ashamed of the poor, as the world regards them, for Jesus the Lord Himself voluntarily became poor for our sakes: “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). We are rich in God’s mercy and grace and rich in character if we are in the likeness of Jesus.

There are segments, to be sure, where it seems that Varner has not quite got things ‘right’ (the most subjective word in all of academic biblical scholarship). In his textual note at 3:3 he says

Although normally quite reticent to dissent from the readings of the two critical texts of NA27 and UBS4, I have nevertheless chosen to adopt the ἴδε reading for the five following reasons, each of which is based on what textual scholars call internal evidence. (1) In every other case in which the conditional εἰ δὲ appears in James, the δὲ clearly expresses an idea that is adversative to what he has just stated (1:5; 2:9, 11; 3:14; 4:11). Such an adversative idea is *not* the case if there is a conditional sentence beginning 3:3. (2) If 3:3 is a conditional sentence, the καὶ that initiates the proposed apodosis seems to be out of place. Although English translators have recognize this by rendering it as “also,” it is not the normal role of an apodosis in a conditional sentence to add new information to the protasis, but rather to show the result of fulfilling the hypothetical condition in the protasis. (3) Because James uses the aorist middle imperative of ὁράω (ἰδοὺ) to call attention to the ship/rudder in 3:4 and to the fire/forest in 3:5a, the parallelism is more evident if he uses the aorist active imperative of ὁράω (ἴδε) in 3:3. This parallelism can be seen in the above sentence flow analysis by bolding the paralleled imperatives. (4) The καὶ in its postpositive position in 3:4 appears to refer back to the preceding illustration in a way that is consistent with the idea that James desires to call attention to the previous command to “look” at something in the natural processes of life. (5) Although Metzger informs us that a majority of the UBS committee members preferred εἰ δὲ as the more difficult reading,⁵⁰⁴ couldn’t the very same point be made about ἴδε, because it breaks the parallelism with ἰδοὺ in 3:4 and 5? If someone objects that it would be inconsistent to utilize both ἴδε and ἰδοὺ in such a close context, it should be noted that the following passages have these two different imperative forms utilized together in quite close context: Ecclesiastes 2:1 (LXX); Mark 3:32, 34; Matthew 25:6, 20, 22, 25; John 16:29, 32; and Galatians 1:20; 5:2.

Here’s the evidence for the reading in NA27-

‘ ἴδε 81. 323. 614. 630. 945. 1241. 1505. 1739 *pm* sa? (C P *sine acc.*)

‡ ἰδοὺ *pc* sa?

‡ *txt* B² L Ψ 049. 33. 69 *pm* lat bo (Ⲛ A B* K *sine acc.*; Ⲛ* *add.* γαρ)¹

The text, as it stands, is εἰ δέ. The reading which Varner wishes us to accept, in spite of his ‘5 reasons’, is far too inferiorly attested for my liking. No amount of exegetical juggling or text-critical acrobatics can overcome the insufficiency of the evidence here. εἰ δέ is also the textual reading Tischendorf adopts as do Westcott and Hort. The only

¹ Nestle, E., Nestle, E., Aland, K., Aland, B., & Universität Münster. Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung. (1993). *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27. Aufl., rev.) (592). Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung.

edition which shares Varner's reading is Robinson/ Pierpont – following the Byzantine textual tradition.

There are other points of dissimilarity but to be fair there hasn't been a commentary written by anyone of any theological (or a-theological) perspective that isn't subject to critique. That's why we all write commentaries: because no one has quite got it right yet so we want to shed more light on the text than is presently available in the works of others. There's something of the spirit of arrogance in the writing of commentaries, and we all would do well to remember that of ourselves as well as of others.

Overall I found Varner's efforts Herculean. He has mastered the language of James, the message of James, the theology of James, and the meaning of James for contemporary readers in a way that surpasses the attempts of Scot McKnight and Ralph Martin.

If readers of the Letter of James were required, by some strange impulse of Divine Providence, to read one commentary on said book, it should be this one. This one or John Calvin's (or my own, but humility prohibits me from saying anything further about that one). Those willing to make the effort and take the time to do so will be richly rewarded.

Jim West
Quartz Hill School of Theology